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RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUCPDOG/USDOC WASHDC
RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA
RUEAUSA/DEPT OF HHS WASHDC
RUCPDC/NOAA WASHDC
RUEHRC/USDA FAS WASHDC
RUEAEPA/EPA WASHDC
RUEHZN/ENVIRONMENT SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 004678

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR OES/PCI, OES/ENV, AND SCA/INS
STATE FOR STAS
DOE FOR INTERNATIONAL
HHS FOR OGHA STEIGER, HICKEY AND VALDEZ
NIH FOR GLASS AND MAMPILLY
FDA FOR LUMPKIN AND WELSCH
CDC FOR BLOUNT AND FARRELL
INTERIOR FOR FWS RILEY
STATE PASS TO NSF FOR INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SENV](#) [TSPL](#) [TBIO](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [KSAC](#) [IN](#)
SUBJECT: NATIONAL WORKSHOP EMPHASIZES MERCURY MANAGEMENT

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11. (U) Summary: ESTHOffs attended a national workshop focused on "Mercury Usage, Processes, and Impacts in India," hosted by Indian NGO Toxics Link on 27-29 September. India is one of the world's biggest consumers of mercury (Hg) and both private sector and government representatives in attendance emphasized the need for improved mercury management, from import through disposal. The Government of India (GOI) announced plans to form a Task Force on Hg management and discussed international regulations, while Government of Delhi officials discussed current and proposed initiatives to improve practices and raise awareness about the dangers of Hg. Representatives from the chlor-alkali, medical/dental, lighting, and wastewater treatment sectors provided an overview of key initiatives and challenges associated with reducing Hg dependency. An initial study of fish in West Bengal suggests that mercury contamination is above the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's maximum allowable intake threshold in more than one-third of the commonly consumed species tested. End summary.

GOI ANNOUNCES NEW COMMITTEE TO STUDY MERCURY USAGE

12. (SBU) Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) Joint Secretary, Mr. R.K. Vaish, announced the formation of a "mercury

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management" Task Force (TF) limited in purview to key Hg-intensive sectors. Initially, the TF will focus on increasing the use of compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), establish standards for their maximum allowable mercury content, and possibly address CFL recycling concerns. Dr. G.K. Pandey of the MoEF explained the TF will not address mercury emissions from coal-fired thermal power

plants explaining such emissions were a secondary concern to be addressed by the GOI in the unspecified future.

INTERNATIONAL REGULATION DISCUSSED

13. (SBU) A representative from the NGO Health Care Without Harm lamented that, "India and the United States are two of the countries that have been most resistant" to international regulation of the mercury trade. Dr. Pandey responded that the issue would have to be addressed by the new Task Force, but remained non-committal and exhibited minimal interest in the discussion. Representatives from the European Union presented data regarding their Hg regulatory scheme which was met with interest from Indian industry representatives. Currently, India does not regulate the handling or sale of mercury, but does have regulations for domestic disposal.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Infrastructure remains inadequate for enforcement of Hg disposal regulations. Restricting the import of mercury into India could have unintended negative consequences if effective waste management and recycling programs are not established in parallel. If the price of mercury rises due to a decrease in net availability, trash-pickers would have a greater incentive to collect mercury from medical and other waste products for resale on the black market. This could lead to increased exposure to the neurotoxin among this vulnerable population, often comprised of destitute Indian children.

GOVERNMENT OF DELHI MERCURY INITIATIVES

15. (U) Government of Delhi (GoD) representatives emphasized the need to increase public awareness about the dangers of mercury and to develop a strategy to reduce usage. Mercury has historically been thought to hold mystical healing properties; misinformation and lack of awareness remain serious healthcare challenges. GoD has been producing films for schools to raise awareness and would like to expand the campaign to educate healthcare practitioners.

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Additionally, GoD expressed interest in working with the World Health Organization to assess mercury usage and healthcare waste management programs. Officials also called for a "best practices" manual, to provide guidelines for a comprehensive handling and disposal strategy. GoD representatives were also interested in purchasing Hg-free medical equipment and in discussing Hg trafficking and trade issues. COMMENT: Despite the fact several "best practices" manuals are available and in use in India, coordination of best practices and information sharing remains a significant challenge.

REDUCING MERCURY USAGE IN KEY SECTORS

16. (U) CHLOR-ALKALI INDUSTRY: Chlor-alkali production in India is approximately fifty times more mercury-intensive than the global average and is responsible for greater net mercury emissions than the combined release from all of India's coal-fired power plants, according to data provided at the workshop. This highly mercury-intensive industry produces hydrogen, chlorine and sodium hydroxide as end products, and is now taking voluntary action to phase-out Hg use in its production processes with a domestic goal of completely eliminating industrial Hg use by 2012. All but nine chlor-alkali facilities, which account for approximately 12% of India's overall production, have converted to a newer, more efficient Hg-free membrane cell process. Significant challenges remain to implementing sustainable mercury management, including accurate assessment and full disclosure of industrial mercury usage and disposal practices. The mercury recovered from decommissioned chlor-alkali plants is often resold into the market, depressing prices and increasing availability for other uses.

17. (SBU) MEDICAL SECTOR: Representatives from the medical field described significant challenges, frustrating experiences, and disincentives discouraging medical facilities in India from obtaining Hg-free equipment and reducing their Hg footprint.

Certified, mercury-free thermometers and blood pressure monitors are not readily available in India. Breakage of these devices coupled with inadequate disposal techniques represents a major source of exposure. According to the experience of one hospital administrator, import of Hg-free devices is subject to a 36.73% import tariff, as opposed to the standard 9%, and is also subject to a lengthy customs clearance process. The GoD Department of Environment appeared committed to reducing mercury use in the medical field and stated that Delhi's hospitals are a "ready market" for certified, Hg-free devices. COMMENT: GOI sponsorship could reduce the customs wait time and reclassification of this equipment as "life-saving instruments" could lower import tariffs.

18. (SBU) MEDICAL EQUIPMENT STANDARDS AND VERIFICATION: Medical sector representatives pressed for the formation of a standards committee to certify imported Hg-free devices and to establish verification procedures. A participant commented that establishing standards was undermined by systemic corruption within the Bureau of Indian Standards. This comment was met by widespread agreement.

19. (U) LIGHTING SECTOR: The GOI continues to promote the use of energy saving compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs), which are now mandatory for commercial buildings in several states, in an attempt to meet increased electricity demand for lighting. Despite the mercury content of CFLs, the GOI expects the switch will result in an overall reduction in the amount of mercury released into the environment due to a net decrease in electricity consumed for lighting. The lighting industry itself is at the forefront of reducing Hg usage, with initiatives promoting Hg-free xenon auto lights and high pressure sodium lamps. The Philips Company for example has set a specific manufacturing target for reducing mercury

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in its lights. Industry representatives have also called for implementation of disposal requirements and development of economic incentives to promote low Hg lights in India.

MERCURY CONTAMINATION IN THE FOOD SUPPLY: WEST BENGAL STUDY

10. (U) Preliminary research investigating mercury levels in fish from West Bengal suggests bioaccumulation may pose serious health risks and warrants further investigation. The initial study, completed by the Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA), tested mercury levels found in the flesh of commonly consumed fish species. Fish were retrieved from a variety of locations exposed to different pollution levels and were purchased from fishermen taking them to market. Fish constitutes a very large part of a typical diet in West Bengal and mercury levels of certain samples were substantially above the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's maximum allowable intake threshold in more than one-third of the commonly consumed species tested. The researcher is eager to perform an expanded study, pending availability of funding.

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